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WHILE WE HAVE long known that one size does not fit all when it comes to educating children, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the need for greater flexibility in education into sharp focus.

Thankfully, Granite State families have more educational choices than those in many other states. As well as traditional district schools, we have charter schools, magnet schools, online learning options, an education tax credit scholarship program, and the Learn Everywhere program, which offers academic credit for programs in non-traditional settings. Last June, when New Hampshire passed the new Education Freedom Accounts (EFA) program, it brought parental choice in education to the next level, truly recognizing parents as the first educators of their children and trusting them to do what's best.

Under the new program, families can apply through Children's Scholarship Fund (CSF), which was selected by the New Hampshire Department of Education to administer this program this year. Eligible families use funds deposited in an EFA account to pay for private school tuition, online learning programs, tutoring, and many other educational expenses. The EFA represents the base state education funding allocated to that child, with more for children meeting other criteria including those with special needs.

There are common sense limits to how parents can spend EFAs (for example, EFAs cannot be used to reimburse parents for their time or pay for gym memberships or sports uniforms), and each expenditure must be reviewed and approved by CSF, which in turn is accountable to the Department of Education. Ultimately, though, the parent is empowered to decide how and where their child is educated, and which schools or services best meet their child's needs.

At a recent Cato Institute event, Governor Chris Sununu described the EFA program this way: "Whatever state money would normally go to educate that child in the school: that's your money. You decide where it can go, whether it's a private school, homeschool, tutoring, virtual learning academies online ... You do you. You decide the best path for your child."

We couldn't agree more. Armed with EFAs, parents have the means to move their child if a school decides to go remote or institutes a problematic curriculum. They cannot be held hostage by a system that does not align with their values.

In addition, the EFA program provides a welcoming environment for innovative education models to flourish. For example, Latitude Learning Resources, which offers in-person group lessons and activities to support homeschool families, is growing as new EFA families have enrolled in the wake of the pandemic.

Immediately after the EFA program was enacted, CSF was flooded with applications, and they have continued to flow in throughout the school year. As of January, the families of 1,837 New Hampshire children are using EFAs. By law, 100% of these families have annual incomes at or less than three times the federal poverty level (\$78,600 for a family of four based on 2020 income), and 47.6% also qualify for free and reduced-price lunch.

It should not be surprising that so many Granite State families jumped at the chance to direct their child's education. A recent survey from National School Choice Week found that more than half of parents (52%) said they were considering choosing a new or different school for one of their children, or had considered doing so in the past year.

Another poll from the American Federation for Children from June 2021 showed that 74% of all respondents — and an overwhelming 80% of those with children currently attending public schools — support school choice, an all-time high.

Responding to this parental demand, New Hampshire and 18 other states enacted new or expanded school choice policies in 2021, now known as the Year of School Choice.

Even in the face of such strong demand for choice, efforts are underway in the legislature to eliminate the EFA program. But we can't turn back the clock on EFAs any more than we can return to pre-COVID times. New Hampshire families are already exercising their freedom and power as the first educators of their children, and they are lighting the way for a new era of education that serves children rather than systems.